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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000741

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SES-O, NEA/FO, NEA/ELA, NEA/I
NSC FOR ABRAMS
CENTCOM FOR POLAD
BAGHDAD FOR PM, POL, FO

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/12/2018

TAGS: [PREL](#) [MOPS](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [SY](#) [IZ](#)

SUBJECT: SARG ALLEGES U.S. MILITARY RAID KILLS 8 CIVILIANS

REF: 10/26 EMBASSY DAMASCUS-S/S-O EMAIL

Classified By: CDA Maura Connelly, reasons 1.5 b and d.

11. (U) This is an action request. See para 10.

12. (C) Summary: Roughly two hours after local internet and Syrian TV reported an alleged U.S. military attack in eastern Syria, Syrian Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Faisal Mekdad convoked Charge and Pol/Econ Chief on October 26 (2200 local) to protest. According to Mekdad, Syrian military sources had confirmed U.S. military helicopters had penetrated eight kilometers into Syrian territory and launched an attack that killed seven Syrian civilians. Charge pledged to check with Washington, CENTCOM, and MFN-I to ascertain the facts as we knew them. We request Department and Embassy Baghdad coordinate with CENTCOM and MNF-I to review Syrian allegations, report on what happened, and instructions on how to respond to the SARG. End Summary

13. (C) Mekdad cited Syrian military sources who reported four U.S. helicopters crossed the Syrian border from Iraq, landed at the Bou Kamal farm in the eastern region of Bukaria, killed members of three Syrian families (eight civilians dead and one injured), and then returned to Iraq. The act was all the more troubling in view of Syria's recent actions to ensure excellent relations with its brother in Iraq, Mekdad added.

14. (C) Mekdad condemned the raid as an aggressive act and violation of Syrian sovereignty. The United States was mistaken if it believed Syria would not respond to the incident and was incapable of protecting itself, he said. The Syrian government believed the attack was not an accident and that it confirmed the U.S. invasion of Iraq was meant to undermine regional stability and violate the sovereignty of Arab countries. While in the past the SARG had cooperated with the U.S., the incident showed the U.S. interest remained attacking and undermining the stability of countries in the region.

15. (C) Charge sought clarification on whether the reports were established fact. Mekdad replied Syrian military sources had confirmed the details presented. Charge expressed condolences for any deaths of innocent civilians, but explained that we were still seeking information from USG sources to confirm the event from the highest available sources in Washington and Baghdad.

¶6. (C) Mekdad said the SARG had made public its claims of U.S. responsibility as well as its demand for an investigation and condemnation. The SARG was seeking a formal U.S. apology. The SARG had also notified the Iraqi Embassy in Syria of its responsibility and called on it to launch an investigation and prevent of the use of Iraq territory for "aggression against Syria." The SARG, Mekdad continued, would be publishing a formal statement on Syrian state media Sanaa. (Note: translated text sent to NEA via unclass email.)

¶7. (C) Charge replied the Embassy would convey Mekdad's statement to Washington and continue to try to ascertain the facts from our side. "We thought we were moving our relations forward," Mekdad replied, noting the U.S. helicopters had reportedly flown eight kilometers inside Syrian airspace.

¶8. (C) Charge asked whether the SARG was planning next steps. Mekdad suggested that the SARG was currently evaluating all options, but indicated there would be some unspecified response. Syria demanded an official U.S. apology, he reiterated. Charge pledged to come back to the SARG once we had more information.

¶9. (C) Comment: The SARG publicized this story immediately, suggesting its intent to discredit the U.S. and U.S. policy in the region. Without U.S. facts to counter the Syrian version, Syria would enjoy a virtual press monopoly over the story. Though Syrian military retaliation seems

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unlikely at this stage, we take Mekdad at his word that the regime is evaluating possible responses that could target U.S. Embassy operations, ongoing PRM/UNHCR Iraqi refugee resettlement, or other U.S. equities. EAC cable to follow.

¶10. (C) Action Request: Request Department and Embassy Baghdad engage MNF-I and CENTCOM to ascertain what happened and to provide an approved explanation we can share with the Syrian government and others. We also recommend Department press guidance expressing the USG's desire to investigate and report on the matter will be useful in responding to media reports and the SARG's statement.

CONNELLY